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ABSTRACT

A cognitive-developmental approach to reading instruction for preschool children is presented in this document. Common misunderstandings about reading instruction are discussed, and examples of young children's reading readiness are used to illustrate how developmental readiness, self-motivation, and the influence of an appropriate learning environment supplant the need for countless hours in reading skill instruction. Traditional instructional methods are criticized for being developmentally inappropriate; the validity of the worksheet, drill, and skill method is questioned -- many functionally illiterate high school graduates are the result of those techniques. It is contended that children pass through various developmental levels as they become able to read and that these levels become the foundation whereby children form mental images of objects and experiences. (The first level lays a foundation for decoding. The second level involves manipulation of materials. The third level emerges as the child begins to use written and spoken language.) The teacher who uses formal methods of reading instruction is said to teach contrary to the child's developmental nature. (Author/DB)

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# THE DEVELOPMENTAL PATHWAY TO READING

Bruce R. Stam

Recently, while giving a tour of our preschool lab and discussing how children construct a knowledge of reading, a teacher commented, "So you really don't teach a reading program at your school?" I was startled by this statement, as I had just given what I thought was a well received, articulate and understandable discussion, sharing many examples of how the experiences provided in the center facilitate the development of reading in children. Included in this were examples of how teachers could facilitate the ability to read in children. After more discussion, I realized that this teacher believed teaching is something that you do to children by sitting them down, requiring quiet and inactivity, which is sometimes called "traditional teaching techniques." I was speaking about and demonstrating developmental and scientific methods regarding the acquisition of reading by children. Many individuals, this teacher included, are guided in choosing teaching styles by recalling previous methods used on them as children and by what "feels right"; not necessarily by what is developmentally appropriate. My purpose in this article is to discuss an appropriate cognitive developmental approach for preschool children in the area of reading, by recounting my experience with the teacher.

After hearing her comments, I wondered why the teacher wasn't aware of the connection between the examples I had shown and how children develop the ability to read. My first impulse was to say to her, "Look, you really don't understand how young children develop the ability to read. Reading is a process that can be developed all through the preschool years. Children don't learn by being forced to sit down, and constantly drilled and skilled via worksheets and by teachers who expect the right answers and correct thoughts (as if there is such a thing)." Quickly, composing myself and my thoughts, I decided to be more precise this time. I began

to explain how preschool children develop the ability to read versus how teachers have tried to use grade school reading techniques with preschool children.

In my college classroom teaching, I frequently draw upon personal experiences with children, and this time I used the example of my first grade daughter. Like most parents, I have been concerned about my daughter learning to read. Trying to be a conscientious parent, we have made frequent trips to the library and I read to her often. (In addition to this, we have taken trips to museums, historical viewpoints, followed cooking recipes and in general exposed her to the usefulness of words and reading.) During one library trip, the summer before first grade, my daughter said to me, "Where are the books I can read?" We located onewhich contained about 30 words. Upon arriving at home, she, in her mind, was ready to learn to read. I sat on the couch and read the first page to her. She then slowly read the words to me, pointing out the words as we went. After two days of three or four-20 minute reading sessions, she was able to recall and recognize the words in this book.

I used this example with the teacher to establish four points: One, my daughter was developmentally ready to read. Two, she had arrived at the point where she was self-motivated. Three, she had been in an appropriate learning environment; and four, to illustrate the idea that when points one, two, and three are established, then countless hours in reading skill instruction are not needed (although there are certain arbitrary facts and skills that must be transmitted). Once these four prerequisites to reading occur, children who are then provided with reading material that enables discovery of the world or personal enjoyment can be accomplished, self-motivated readers.

In trying to understand the relationship of developmental readiness to reading, it may be helpful to examine the development of walking and talking. Few parents consciously try to teach their child to walk. Most parents assist their child to walk by providing an environment that is conducive to walking. Similarly, few

parents use flash cards and memorization techniques inhelping their child to talk. Most parents model talking in the natural environment. In fact, it is inconceivable to most to try to teach a three-month-old to walk or an eight-month-old to talk. The reason is that this would be developmentally inappropriate, and a waste of time. If we merely wait and provide places to crawl and stand up, or allow infants to hear language (provide appropriate experiences and environments), these inborn, naturally-released abilities emerge. The ability to read will also happen according to the child's developmental time table, if teachers or parents provide developmentally appropriate environments.

Examining the public schools, we see teachers spending many hours through many years trying to teach reading skills and remediate negative reading attitudes and experiences. If we examine what happens in many kindergartens, we see well-meaning teachers trying to use similar methods: methods which are developmentally inappropriate for preschoolers. Concerning the issue of development and learning, Paul Goodman (1960) has said, "We see that infants learn to speak in their own way in an environment where there is speaking and where they are addressed and take part. If we tried to teach children to speak according to our own theories and methods and schedules, as we try to teach reading, there would be as many stammerers as there are bad readers." John Holt (1979) has stated that reading skill instruction requires approximately 30 hours. Most first graders receive considerably more than 30 hours of instruction in the first weeks of school. When we consider the amount of time spent on teaching reading by the public schools, and realize how many graduates complete 12 years of education and are either functionally illiterate or illiterate altogether, one soon questions the validity of the worksheet, drill and skill method.

In talking with the teacher, I proceeded to tell her how a child becomes developmentally ready. We are all aware of how an infant acquires the abilities to walk and progress through the various physical stages. The same is true for

reading. Children pass through various developmental levels.

Weikart, Rogers, Adcock and McClelland (1971) have stated, "Reading is essentially a process of decoding symbols and comprehending what those symbols mean." These researchers have identified three levels that children pass through as they develop the ability to read the written word. These levels become the foundation whereby the child is able to form mental images of objects and experiences. Generally, one can expect children to be at least two years of age when they start to deal with these concepts. At the first level (index level), children primarily need direct experiences with real objects and materials in order to build a sound foundation for the comprehension aspect of reading. As an adult, is it easier to understand a set of written instructions for making a casserole or a set of instructions for a minor engine tune-up? If one is familiar with engines, one can easily follow those types of written instructions. Similarly, if our experiences are related to cooking, recipes are easier to follow. We comprehend the written word best when we can connect the words to a rich background of direct experiences.

At index level, foundations are laid for the decoding aspect of reading. Before the written word can make any sense at all, the child needs experiences with the symbolic function, which is the idea that one part/aspect of an object can represent a whole entity or stand for the entire object. For example, through experience with objects and materials, children begin to associate the sound of the telephone (part/aspect) with the telephone (the entire object). Seeing the print of cookie cutters in playdough, the child can identify which cookie cutter was used to form which cookie, without seeing the actual cutting of the cookies. When the cookies are baking, young children can associate the smell of the cookies (part/aspect) with the fact that cookies are baking (entire object). Once again, children who have experiences identify parts of objects as representations of entire objects are beginning to use symbols, which will allow

children to form for themselves a beginning framework for reading.

It is also important for children to continue to explore and use real materials, thereby constructing a framework leading toward reading. Dramatic play in a variety of dramatizations, block play, field trips with recall of experience, following picture recipes, telling stories, being read to and expressing oneself through music, movement and art materials, are a few of the essential ingredients of becoming more and more familiar with symbols. This is the second stage (symbol level). In all levels, children are encouraged to make their own symbols of events and/or objects, using a variety of raw materials. One will find that when children are allowed to do this, the experiences are far more meaningful.

The philosopher, Susan Langer (1942), has advanced the theory that human beings are born with an urgent biological need to talk, draw, paint, sculpt, act, dance and make music, because they need to deal with the meaning of their experience in symbolic form. Unfortunately, in many programs we find children are urged to be quiet and not talk, sit and not act, that music occurs once a week; and drawing, painting, sculpture and dance are extinct or nearly so! Basic biological urges of children to represent are being circumvented and denied by our educational system.

I remember sitting in the kitchen with my three-year-old son eating pretzels. With all the exuberance of his age, he was waving the pretzels in the air, saying, "Butterflies, butterflies; I've made butterflies." Yes, in symbolic form, he had made butterflies. He was allowing an object (pretzels) to represent or symbolize another object (butterflies). Children have these urges to represent and demonstrate their understanding that one thing can represent or "stand for" another. This ability to represent becomes part of the pathway to reading.

The third and final level in the process to reading (sign level) is the emerging ability to use written and spoken words, which evoke meaningful mental

images. Think of the following sentence: "They walked along the sandy beach together." What type of mental image does this represent for you? Did you see a sunset, the ocean, two adults or children? As adults, we can create vivid mental pictures. Children must develop this ability and it generally becomes strongly developed during what Piaget calls the stage of concrete operations (beginning at approximately seven years of age). Also, at the third level, children in concrete operations are able to use written words to represent objects, events or people--and this is reading. This ability unfolds in the child, as does the ability to walk or talk. Teachers must remember to provide a wide variety of activities that motivate the child to represent thoughts, ideas, emotions, and actions. In this way, children pass through all developmental levels and organize their own thoughts and concepts for dealing with the acquisition of reading.

The previous discussion focuses primarily on the cognitive aspects of reading. Teachers are also encouraged to allow all children to meet their physical development needs. The development of reading in young children is not complete without focusing on the physical activities. Children need running, climbing, throwing, digging, hopping, jumping, and creative movement to develop their motor-perceptual abilities which will also contribute to the development of reading.

I concluded my discussion with the teacher and will conclude this paper by saying, "Teachers who continue to use the traditional methods of teaching reading do so contrary to the developmental nature of the child. Formal methods are contrary to all the developmental research which has been done. These methods are being implemented at the expense of the young child, and violate children's learning styles. Anyone who is presently using traditional methods should seriously consider the negative impact they are having on young children. Teachers who are presently using developmental ideas with children are finding children successfully learning to read, and I encourage preschool teachers to begin to allow

children the right to talk, draw, paint, sculpt, act, dance, and make music thereby creating an atmosphere conducive to the development of reading."

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